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ABSTRACT

What principals are taught about their roles differs markedly from how they actually perceive and experience their roles. To discover the principals' views, comments made in discussion groups by 44 principals in a large urban Midwest school system over a four-month period were analyzed. Their descriptions of their roles and desired role changes were compared with empirical and normative role descriptions found in administrative textbooks, professional publications, and research literature. The principals perceived themselves as relatively powerless "middle managers" rather than leaders, caught between community and higher administration pressures, and functioning mainly to coordinate their staff, administer regulations, and solve immediate problems. Their desires included more control within their schools, larger staffs, and more personal growth and rewards. These experiences contrast strongly with normative role emphases on educational leadership, curriculum development, and student guidance, and also differ from empirical descriptions of principals' solidarity with teachers and desire for greater instructional leadership. The tension between what principals are taught and what they experience may lead to role conflict and stress, and may require reorientation of principals' training. (RW)

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PRINCIPALS DISCUSS THEIR ROLES:

AN OBSERVATIONAL STUDY

by

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INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 1978 I began observing a group of principals from an urban school system in the Midwest who were participating in a problem-solving, peer group seminar. The group, sponsored by the superintendent, was one of several he had assembled to bring together persons holding similar positions to share perceptions and to communicate them to the other groups through published excerpts of the meetings.

My role, as the official recorder of these sessions, was to take extensive notes and to provide appropriate excerpts, including quotations (but without individual attributions), which were distributed back to the principals and to the other seminar groups.

When I joined the group in February, 1978, it was beginning its first session of the 1977-78 school year. Having been formed in the fall of 1976, it had had a full schedule of biweekly meetings during the previous school year, had disbanded for the summer, and was getting reorganized for the 1977-78 season. Funding and scheduling problems had kept it from meeting during the fall of 1977.

The group members seemed to know one another well, both from the previous year's sessions and from other interactions within the system. The sessions, which usually lasted a full morning or afternoon, were conducted like an informal college seminar.

All groups participating in the seminars used the same room. Tables and chairs were arranged in a large U around a central open space. A display easel with paper was placed at the opening of the U and pages from previous sessions were tacked on the walls. Discussions in the principals' group were led by an academic teacher and researcher in the field of educational administration from another Midwestern city hired by the superintendent. The coordinator, who was also trained in the use of nondirective organizational development, was well known to most participants, because he had conducted the previous year's sessions. Usually, the coordinator stood inside the U during the sessions. He fielded questions and directed discussions much like a college teacher. He encouraged participants to stick to the day's agenda and he usually had several topics to introduce, but he also helped members articulate their problems and concerns and perceptions of their role and of their place in the system. He served as a resource to the group for information about other school systems and, to some extent, as an informal liaison for the group with the superintendent.

I did not know any members of the seminar group or the coordinator prior to the meetings. As a graduate student I was unconnected with the school system, and my previous work in educational consulting and research had not involved me with this system. My academic interests are in the politics and organizational structure of education, and I had had considerable experience recording discussions of educators during group meetings of public school boards, of evaluation, advisory and consulting groups, and of planning meetings.

I sat at a small table at the back of the room facing the coordinator. Except for minor cordialities at the beginning and end of the sessions, I had little interaction with participants, and I did not participate in any session. Occasionally I would be asked to highlight or delete something from the excerpts. But this was rare. participants got into a wide range of topics and seemed to speak freely and unself-consciously. Often they seemed to forget that the session was being recorded and would be excerpted.

This opportunity to listen to principals unobtrusively and to record what they said about themselves while among peers forms the basis of my paper. It is an observational and hence an exploratory study which provides a unique view of the principalship.

OBJECTIVES AND RATIONALE

The aim of this study is to document how a peer group of elementary and secondary school principals in a large, urban school system characterize their roles. The point of view expressed by principals is compared to standard ways of viewing the principal's role as it is expressed in current research and in administrative training manuals. My perspective in undertaking the study parallels that voiced by the social psychologist Tamotsu Shibutani, speaking of reference group theory. "To understand what a man does, we must get at his unique perspective--what he takes for granted and how he defines the situation--but in mass societies we must learn in addition the social world in which he is participating in a

given act." (1955, p. 562) Similarly, Karl Weick has cautioned us to notice what is not as well as what is taking place (or assumed) in a situation. (Weick, 1976, p. 10)

Principals are, from their administrative and professional training and from their personal acceptance of the public myths surrounding American education, often confronted with the role expectations held by community/ parents/other educators/researchers/ and themselves which may or may not fit the realitites they experience in their everyday lives. The pre-set role society expects them to take on may differ from the negotiated role they make for themselves.

In this study I wanted to find out how principals see and describe their own roles. Speaking in their own words with peers in a relatively informal setting, how do principals talk about themselves? Specifically, what themes and issues do the principals identify as critical; how do they characterize their educational and social responsibilities; how do they view their political positions within a large school system; what are their job frustrations, expectations, and preoccupations; and what role would they describe for themselves in a reorganized school system?

Consistently underlying my interest was the desire to compare these statements and reflections with empirical research on what principals do and with the normative and exhortative literature often used to prepare (and then maintain) principals in their jobs. Finally, I have tried to look for explanations or approaches in the literature of organizational

behavior and social psychology to explain the disjunctions I saw between the perceived and expected roles.

Gross, Mason and McEachern, 1958, in their classic study of school superintendents, defined role as composed of three parts: social location, behaviors, and expectations. My study attempts to partition these dimensions: to look at what principals say about themselves as indices of their behavior and their social location within the school system, and to contrast these perceptions with the external expectations placed on them by society and significant others. In this way, I have adopted Turner's concept, 1962, of a split between role-taking (accepting and conforming to the distinct behaviors of a set role in order to validate a self-image which is essentially expected by others) and role-making (or the interactive process of creating and modifying roles to suit circumstances) as the theoretical substructure of this paper. However, this is less a paper on role theory or reference group theory than a report of an observational study.

This study records the off-the-cuff comments of principals in a group situation among their peers. This is an important perspective, because principals are typically not putting on "airs" in front of their colleagues when discussing their role. They are giving voice to shared perceptions. Whereas the official questionnaire ("How would you rate the following tasks in terms of their importance to the principal's role?") may place the principal in the position of trying to "live up" to official expectations, even his or her own, and thus may elicit a high

proportion of learned responses rather than true attitudes; off-the cuff remarks may get at less formalized perceptions, genuine concerns and frustrations. The informal group may, if anything, heighten the potential for negative comments because of the collegial need for group support in a gripe session. Administrative sponsorship of the group sessions and the sharing of excerpts of the meetings with other school system groups somewhat alleviated this problem. But the findings of my study must be seen as only one part of the total documentation of the principal's role. They must be considered along with more official statements about time allocation, functions, and career succession, as well as with studies of other kinds of managerial work.

BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Considerable work has been done to document and describe the role school principals actually perform. Large-scale surveys have used formal questionnaires face-to-face interviews to question principals about their jobs. These surveys have asked principals about their job functions (McPherson, Salley & Baehr, 1975; Baehr, 1975), problems (Pharis & Zakariya, 1978; Association of California School Administrators, 1978), power (National Elementary School Principal, 1979), time allocations (Reed, 1977), organizational styles (Delon & Evans, 1976), perceptions of authority and responsibility (Inbar, 1977), and administrative competencies (McCleary, 1975). A few ethnographic studies have tracked principals over a day, week or year to describe their characteristic behaviors (Porter-Gehrie, 1978; Peterson, 1977; Wolcott, 1973; Keller, 1974).

In addition to purely descriptive studies, correlational studies have sought to specify the relationship of principal's roles and perceptions to areas such as rulemaking (Caldwell & Lutz, 1978), career succession (Gaertner, 1978), competency (Sause, 1974), and personality traits (Schutz, 1977; Charters, 1979). Using observational techniques Sarason, 1971, described the principal's role in the process of change within a school.

Individual principals have offered their perceptions of the pressures (Jackson, 1977) and purposes (Weldy, 1979) of their jobs in journal articles and monographs. Principals often offer each other advice in professional magazines (Pole, 1976 and Afton, 1974 are two arbitrary examples among many). These individual reports provide empirical evidence about personal role perceptions, assumptions, and expectations.

This empirical work forms the background of what we know about what principals do. A second framework for our understanding of the principalship comes from textbooks on administration, administrative manuals, and professional literature in which principals learn and read about themselves. This literature forms the background of expectations for the principal's job.

Textbooks on educational administration which are used to train many principals are normative in describing expected roles and responsibilities. Many of these role statements serve as criteria (or at least as substantive frameworks) for evaluating the performance of principals in

empirical studies. Familiar texts such as Jacobson, Logsdon, & Wiegman, 1973; Lane, Corwin & Monahan, 1966; Lipham & Hoeh, 1974, each offer a list of the duties and responsibilities principals perform.

Lipham and Hoeh, for example, list the following areas as the principal's main tasks in order of importance:

- instructional program
- staff personnel
- student personnel
- financial and physical resources
- school-community relations

School policy manuals are a formal organizational source of job expectations. The system I observed provides detailed job descriptions for secondary and elementary school pricnipals, as well as many pages of system regulations they must follow. Secondary principals are described as chief executive officers with final authority for all that happens in their buildings. Elementary principals have supervisory authority over all their staff.

Professional publications read by principals are replete with articles about what principals are or should be doing. The NASSP Bulletin, American School Baord Journal, and National Elementary Principal are examples of the many publications which are sources of professional identification and communication among principals. These journals typically emphasize principals' "leadership in schools," "apex

positions," "mantles of authority," roles as "educational leaders," "contributions to instructional design," and "expertise on the teaching-learning process." These journals also give weight to the many conflicting pressures on principals, but they usually emphasize the executive ability, educational expertise, and leadership principals must exert to do their jobs. This literature is exhortative, because it typically provides support and morale for principals doing their jobs.

Empirical and exhortative work is sometimes interactive and can conflict. For example, writers on administrative practice disagree about whether the principal's main roles should be educational leadership, staff development and instructional leadership on one side or management and supervision on the other. Recent empirical work seems to show the role of the principal moving from instructional leader to administrative leader (Caldwell & Lutz, 1978). But principals themselves may be resisting this role. Reed, 1977, found that most principals in his study see their role as an educator and an educational leader and resist their role as "just" managers. Yet what they do may not fit what they desire. Peterson, 1977, and Porter-Gehrie, et al., 1978, both focused on the short duration of the principal's tasks' their variety and their unpredictability. Both profiles are strikingly similar to Mintzberg's profile (1973) of the nature of general managerial work. These findings were also generally confirmed in my study.

For example, one elementary principal expressed succinctly the pressures that all principals experienced, saying:

> It is not so much a problem of seeing what our roles are, but of executing our roles to the level we feel is necessary. Maybe high school principals have this time, but elementary principals aren't likely to. (Loud laughter; especially from secondary principals.)
>
> Always things come up to take the place of those you've planned to do and no one is there to whom I can delegate the responsibility...
>
> Administration is making intelligent exceptions to rules. One thing certain is, I won't get to do the things I would like to do that day... (2/1/78)

The literature, lay, professional, and empirical, points to principals as leaders, organizers, and pivotal people in the school system. This study looks at how principals feel about this characterization. It assumes that such perceptions are important considerations not only for understanding the social structure of the school system and the potential discrepancy between perceived social reality and normative criteria. But these perceptions also are useful for training new principals and for drawing comparisons between studies of school organizations and other organized settings.

METHODS

The method of the study is nonparticipant observation supplemented by content analysis of the themes of discussion. Comprehensive notes were made in longhand of biweekly meetings. The entire study represents 39 hours of observation over 15 weeks in the spring of 1978. The observations ended at a natural break in the sessions at the end of the school year. Validity checks were made of the accuracy of content of the notes by feeding back 3-5 pages, single-spaced excerpts of each meeting to all

members at the following session. The raw notes of all the sessions are the basis for this study. They form a documentary whole which could be analyzed for its themes and emphases (Holsti, 1968).

The observational method I used follows from a tradition of observation and recording of ethnographic data which has been documented by Smith (1979), Wax (1968; 1971), Rist (1975; undated) and others.

Content analysis was subsequently used to check the conclusions I had drawn from the observations. A set of conceptual categories of critical themes and concerns was developed from the raw notes. Selection of categories was made in two ways: 1. by a frequency count of the topics mentioned (Becker, 1969; Riley & Stoll, 1968; Holsti, 1969); 2. by taking note of the "importance" of certain issues to the group, established by noting tone of voice, pacing, nonverbal gestures, asides, etc. (Smith & Keith, 1971; Rist, 1973; Rist, 1978; Wolcott, 1973). The enumeration of the content categories and their frequency of mention is given in the Appendix. The unit of analysis of content was the person's whole response until it was concluded or interrupted by another person.

Comments by the coordinator and statements of clarification or questions seeking factual information were not coded. The number of coded responses in each session varied, because later sessions were devoted to the discussion and clarification of reorganization plans for the school system. These session were predominated by factual questions with responses from the coordinator.

The conclusions I have drawn from this setting should be considered preliminary. One characteristic of ethnographic research is that depth and detail are emphasized more than generalizability. I cannot be certain how much of what I observed of these principals is characteristic of this particular group and how much might extend to the more general group of urban school principals or even to principals as a whole. Further research would be needed to verify these findings for other settings.

DATA SOURCE

A total of 44 principals were one among eight groups of teachers, superintendents, students, and community people asked by the superintendent to participate in a series of biweekly organization development seminars. The system is located in an older industrial city in the central Midwest. It has a predominantly black student body and a declining enrollment.

All secondary school principals in the city were asked to attend the seminars. They comprised roughly half of the total seminar group, and half of the attendees at each session. Elementary school principals, representing the racial, ethnic, sexual, and geographic mix of principals in the city, and including those considered "comers" by the system's administrators, were added to bring the total group to 44. The group met either as a whole, or in two back-to-back sessions. Principals were randomly assigned to the morning or afternoon group and both groups

contained both elementary and secondary school principals. Attendance, although strongly encouraged by the superintendent, was not mandatory, and the average session had 30 attendees (varying from 26 to 37). The groups met biweekly, usually for 3-hour sessions, although one full-group session ran for 6 hours with a lunch break. I observed a total of 12 sessions.

The seminars were organized by a planning group of representatives from each of the seminar groups and the coordinators. This group set the "business" agenda for each session. The principals themselves decided on the general topic of discussion for the sequence of seminars, "The Role of the Principal in Our School System."

FINDINGS

The findings of my study fall into two major categories: 1) How do principals describe their roles, including the organizational location, pressures, functions, responsibilities, and power of their jobs? 2) How would principals like to change their roles? I will treat these questions in turn.

Generally, the data show that principals perceived themselves less as educational and community and administrative leaders than as "in the middle" in a large and often cumbersome bureaucracy. They did not talk much about their executive ability and/or their critical or "apex" positions. Principals overwhelmingly accepted the hierarchial, pyramid

structure of the school system and tended to look up it for direction and decisions. They placed more emphasis on rules and administrative procedures than on instructional leadership and discretion in describing their current and desired roles, and they expressed strong peer solidarity.

In this study the social reality of the principal's place in the school system is determined by their place "in the middle" of a large bureaucratic system.

1. How Do Principals Describe Their Roles?

a. Organizational location: Considerable discussion in the seminars centered on the distinguishing character of a principal's role within the school system. The system's job descriptions called secondary principals "chief executive officers" and elementary principals "supervisors" with authority over everything in their buildings. Most principals considered these labels a sham.

> Participant:
> I think chief executive officer is a farce--doesn't mean anything.
>
> Coordinator:
> The question is now that it's there should we try to make it meaningful?
>
> Participant:
> Yes, sure. . . I think it's a great term--we should take it seriously. (2/15/78 PM)

But most principals felt it impossible to exercise the executive leader-

ship implied by their titles. "A CEO is in charge, we have all our tools taken away." (2/15/78 PM)

Participants felt that neither the system nor the public valued or sought their leadership. "The Board members refer to us as 'middle managers.' Our discussions emphasized chief executive officers. This shows that it's a farce." (3/15/78 PM)

Principals pointed to their lack of control over hiring, suspensions, budgets, non-instructional staff supervision, and other areas as examples of their lack of authority. Even in their roles as instructional leaders they felt they did not have the tools they needed:

> . . . we want a slice of the pie to put together a good educational program for our kids. We need to be full time /currently on 9 month contracts/ and to have more staff. (3/15/78 PM)

Pervasive in these discussions was the sense of the principal "in the middle," looking "up" to layers of coordinators, superintendents, and specialists at the district level, looking "down" at teachers, students, and community residents. Principals often gave the impression that their critical relationship with groups outside the school was not recognized by "higher ups" and that they were in much closer touch with the needs of students and the desires of the community than were higher administrators. They expressed much annoyance with the number of regulations, system demands, and uncontrolled outside forces which impinged on administering their schools as they saw fit.

> There is much too much policy and regulations to follow. Too many specifics to really follow them. We have all the authority we need to deal with parents and community. But I can't order stuff I do need; I must order what we don't need under federal guidelines. (2/1/78)

However, this need was not translated into a desire for greater rule flexibility--but rather into a desire to exert their own authority and impose their own consistency through increased power at the local level.

> It needs to be understood all the way up that the local school principal can't be bogged down waiting for policy to be announced. He should feel free to apply judgment without intimidation or overruling. (2/15/78 AM)

Somewhat contradictory to this desire for increased autonmy principals were much more apt to discuss rules than general issues. They devoted almost two entire sessions to the details of suspension policy. They continually looked up to seek system goals, consistency, and hierarchial authority which they expected to flow in a rational and continuous manner from the top. Their frustrations seemed to stem not from carrying out rules, but from the perception that these rules were not rational or inclusive enough.

Although, clearly they often felt hemmed in by regulations and disserved by impersonal and bureaucratic district superintendents, who did not consult with them over policies, the principals did not express much desire for greater latitude to interpret regulations. They interpreted their role as one of carrying out the system's rules and procedures. They simply did not want to have that authority questioned; and they

would have liked to be included in the sessions where policy was discussed and determined.

b. Pressures. The pressures these principals felt seemed to come from two sources: upper administrative bureaucracy with its requirements of paperwork, routines, and conflicting regulations, and from the community. Fear and embarrassment at being overruled seemed to be the main motivation principals felt in dealing with both the community and with higher ups.

Several vignettes are illustrative of how principals described themselves as embarrassed and ignored by the system.

-- I had two teachers with the same seniority, one was marked 'unsatisfactory', one 'satisfactory' and the satisfactory one was let go; put on leave of absence. (2/15/78 PM)

-- I did interviewing of new staff two years ago. And I interviewed for six hours. One person was sent for each position. The District Superintendent, Superintendent, and I interviewed them. We didn't know personnel had already mailed assignments to these people. Don't patronize me. This was embarrassing. The people didn't know why we were interviewing them. It made a fool of us. (2/15/78 AM)

-- When suspending for 10 days it means you want that kid out of your school. If you check for just a suspension it means he may be back. To be safe I check both boxes, 'suspension' and 'adjustment transfer'. Now I do it always. I don't want the kid back!

-- We got the results of the survey on how to make up snow days on /a radio station/ rather than through the administration. Parents wanted to know why we hadn't sent the memo sooner. (It was dated 10 days earlier) but we didn't have it. It made us look bad. (3/15/78)

Intensity in the job itself did not seem to be a large factor in the pressures principals felt. The perception of psychological loneliness or

uniqueness, which has been emphasized in much administrative literature (Sarason, 1971; Jackson, 1977; Wolcott, 1973) was almost missing here. Principals expressed some desires for more staff support, fewer meetings, and more control over time. But they did not give the impression that their job placed undue or impossible burdens on them or their families.

Principals felt pressures from the community to meet educational goals and to follow due process procedures and to present a public image of the school as one that protects children. Still, the principals viewed most community input as a necessary but irritating intrusion in the life of a school.

One principal stated,

> If we didn't need the votes of parents on a tax levy, we wouldn't want to include them at all. (4/5/78)

another,

> Basically we don't have to be concerned with the public. The public has to send its kids to our schools. GM serves the public, but it doesn't involve the public in its designs. (4/5/78)

Others were more moderate.

> I definitely feel that Parent committees is a very good idea at the building level. But if the principal is wise it will be he who mades the decision, rather than a committee decision on how to act. For example, committees are everywhere discussing high school graduation requirements, but high school principals haven't discussed graduation requirements, and I hope the Board realizes this and how ludicrous it is. (4/5/78)

Citizens groups were described more than once as "blood-thirsty" for accountability and difficult to deal with.

Also interesting was the lack of expressed pressure on principals from teachers and faculty. Although principals often accepted the role of staff leaders in their schools, they expressed little direct pressure from faculty members to carry this out. Principals seemed to feel that more was expected from them by students than by faculty. Students looked to them for leadership, to set the tone and the style of the school.

c. Functions. Managing and coordinating a staff was the role principals most frequently mentioned as the one they performed. Second was the role of following correct rules and procedures for administrative regulations; keeping records, evaluating teachers, and carrying out student transfer and disciplinary procedures. The principals described a third role as a firefighter or disturbance handler. This role appeared to take a great deal of time and put principals constantly on their toes to resolve immediate operational or critical disciplinary problems. (Considering their perception of the importance of this third role it is remarkable that only two principals were called back to their schools during the course of meetings and only a handful of telephone calls interrupted the sessions.) The disturbance handler role is closely connected to other roles principals mentioned less often, such as liaison with community, teachers, students, or upper administration; placator of peer or inter-group problems; and interpretor of regulations and procedural applications.

Considering its importance in most administrative literature and in the mythic structure of the profession, instructional leadership was

infrequently mentioned as an important role. Principals seemed to be more directly concerned with the functional questions of administering a school, staff, and building than with the more reflective issues of instruction and curriculum. Even when they expressed desire for an instructional leader's role, it was often only as an abstract commitment to children's educational development, rather than an instrumental expression of how to carry this role out. Their interpretation of instrumental instructional leadership, even when expressed, primarily concerned authority over textbook (or equipment) purchases. It rarely included in this setting concerns about children's differentiated skills, about providing new or tailored settings for specific groups, or otherwise altering, assessing, or improving the educational curriculum.

Principals did, however, see themselves as critical adults in the lives of kids. Some took very seriously their symbolic role in listening and responding to students and in providing stewardship for their educations. I did not hear a harkening to or specific invocation of American values as often in these discussions as I had expected to. Perhaps these values are so well assimilated they need not be said. Principals did not much allude to a symbolic role as figurehead for the school organization and as a focus of community values, but many mannerisms confirmed this role. (Language in all sessions was remarkably "clean" for a group of typical middle managers, and cordial.) Members were invariably "nice" to each other, and to members of other groups, especially students, although they might privately express that these groups were quite off base. Each principal expressed direct advocacy of and loyalty to his or her school.

Principals mentioned less frequently a constellation of functions in which they engaged, such as resource allocation, decision making, community influence, or entrepreneurial activities for the school. None of these is too surprising except perhaps the lumping in of community work. The other tasks fit naturally with the administrative conception of the principalship which most principals voiced. I was surprised, given the principals' expressions of felt pressure from the community, that they did not describe a wider role for themselves in community affairs. Apparently, these principals see themselves primarily as the representative of the school structure on whom the community heaps expectations rather than as shapers of community goals and opinions. Nor was decision making, apart from carrying out rules, a role they expressed to a great extent. Principals did not view themselves primarily as independent, decisive and assertive actors, but as conscientious custodians of administrative trust, which at any time could be withdrawn if they stepped out of line. Their self-described roles confirmed their place in the hierarchy of the school system as middle managers who, aspiring to work their way up, learn the ropes, remain thoroughly trustworthy, and don't stick their necks out too far.

d. Responsibilities. One defined purpose of the seminars was for principals to discuss their desired role and responsibilities. The responsibilities principals described for themselves push us from considering their functional or instrumental perceptions of their job to their normative perceptions (or "vocabularies of motive" in sociological terms) of what a principal's proper conduct should be. Not unexpectedly,

the two responsibilities which were mentioned most strongly were the education of children (or even a "quality" educational experience for children) and staff development and morale. Although neither of these responsibilities accounted for a large number of responses.

This absence might not indicate inattention but just indirect attention to children. In the last seminar one participant noted what he felt was the appalling "lack of concern for students expressed in the seminars."

Another principal countered by saying "I consider many of these problems to be for kids: moving a kiln, and other administrative decisions. I interpreted most of the concerns expressed here as concern for youngsters." The former replied, "I did not." (5/17/78)

The principals seemed to assume a kind of nurturant role toward teachers and students, some of which struck me as overly paternalistic. The principals felt a noblesse oblige to undertake to lead and shape the development and morale of their underlings.

Providing a safe environment for children and procedural due process protection for students and teachers were among the other responsibilities mentioned for a good principal.

Largely missing was an expressed responsibility to undertake risks to defend and protect decisions, or a sense of custodianship of public trust for guiding the development of children, or of responsibility for

representing teachers who might need protection from forces outside school or from administrators higher in the system, or for encouraging change and adaptation of new programs.

Principals undertook the responsibility to carry out system goals, to preserve the organizational status quo and to keep clear of risks and embarrassments. This requires staying cool under pressure, often making decisions quickly, but it does not imply assertiveness or innovative leadership in reexamining goals or directions.

e. Power. Personal power within the school system as principals perceived it themselves is a good index of how they think about themselves and their jobs. In discussions, principals referred over and over, both explicitly and by implication, to the hierarchial version of power and delegated responsibility on which the school system is based. Even though the system and the seminar discussions in which principals were engaged were in the process of considering reorganization models to "decentralize" administration of the schools, no principals openly gave serious consideration to the notion that hierarchial power could be replaced with any other kind. The coordinator referred to collaborating or to team-building among the staff members of a school, but no one seriously considered that a school system could function with any but traditional organizational patterns of authority flowing from one central administration.

Dismissing the idea of a more collegial organizational style within schools, one participant said,

> It sounds good but it never gets to that point, because always there will be one person who does not fit. It needs to be known that there is a boss and there is a subordinate... (2/15/PM)

Most felt that even in a decentralized school system central coordination of policy was essential.

The second perception of power was of the principal as a pragmatic and resilient responder to events. The principal was often characterized as "gutsy," a troubleshooter, or an "all purpose infielder" who had to step in and solve the myriad problems from the breakdown of a boiler to negotiating with an irate parent or disruptive student which occur in the course of a normal school day. But, principals seemed to accept that they would exercise this resilience within the existing hierarchial structure and without trying to adopt other modes of power such as charismatic, collaborative, or even supportive.

One principal summed up his coping ability thus,

> Most textbooks say administration is rational--but some of it is not rational at all. Accepting and coping with this is important. Quietly ignoring our superiors is important. They expect it. Knowing when to play dumb; when to quietly and effectively disobey; not publicly (that is an organizational sin) but privately it is a <u>necessity</u>. We have to remember it is easier to get forgiveness than permission. (Laughter.) If we followed all the regulations, the system would bog down. . . Organizational sins are necessary to be a good administrator. (2/1/78)

Overwhelmingly, principals perceived their power as weak with respect to the overall school system and administration. One principal announced rhetorically,

> What is the problem that makes us feel our voice is not important? (2/15/78 AM)

And, after spending nearly nine hours of group discussion on recommendations for system reorganization, another principal remarked,

> Realistically the impact of this group's deliberations is likely to be very weak on the final decision. (5/17/78)

Many principals seemed frustrated with the dysfunctions of a large bureaucracy. (Most of the vignettes told during the sessions concerned principals being caught in conflicting or untenable situations over ridiculous matters.) This view reinforced the predominant distrust of administrators and the equally skeptical view of the seminar agenda and role itself. Principals "looked up" the system for direction. They aspired up for greater power, certainty, and control over their work settings. But they were skeptical that those above them could understand or cared about their problems.

Weakness, some felt, was endemic in the principal's middle organizational position:

> I don't think it's external factors that keep us weak. Even when external forces are held we are still weak. For example, the applications for department heads within a building go directly to the district superintendent and he gets my recommendation, but sometimes he doesn't take it. Even over kids--I don't have the autonomy to decide to suspend a kid for one day--I can send him home, but I must get district consent as soon as possible. I can't even choose coaches.

> For this reason I'm cautious in accepting what the administration says when it says it wants to decentralize. People in organizations don't <u>want</u> to give up power. (2/15/78 AM)

Principal expressed a remarkable peer solidarity and sense of common purpose. In the final seminar they composed a "consensus statement of their responses to the proposed system reorganization models. They described themselves as "taking a political stand" against their detractors in the upper ranks (specifically a group of superintendents) whom they felt had downgraded their judgment and ability and competence in a previous meeting. Principals showed a feisty zest and group enthusiasm in this effort. (Even the block of dissenters later complimented the group for taking a stand.) Compared to the superintendents seminar which I occasionally attended, this group seemed full of common purpose and fire.

2. How Do Principals Define Their Desired Role? What Changes Do Principals Want In The School System?

a. <u>Control</u>. Principals continuously defined their desired role as one with greater control over their school settings. Control over selection and supervision and training of certified and non-certified staff, control over building-level regulations and policies, authoritiy over internal school funding allocations and budgets, and greater control over students were the primary areas in which principals sought change in their current jobs.

Summarizing their desired role, one principal said,

> I think we mean self-rule--not entirely, but at least more than we have. (5/18/78)

another said,

> To me it's simple--the authority to go along with the responsibility that I have now. (5/19/78)

But they did not want control without full authority. In the first session one principal stated,

> To say the buck stops with the principal is OK if I have control over resources. But so many outside forces are determining where money is spent that I don't have control over the budget. This is my concern. (2/1/78)

Two areas received special emphasis. Principals felt themselves to be powerless and stymied because of the conflicting lines of supervision over non-certified staff people in their buildings. Often this staff would stand on formal hierarchies to defy the principal and leave key duties uncompleted because they would not "take orders" from the principal. Principals found this intolerable and they desired to be "put in charge of all the people in my building."

Budget control over funds spent for textbooks, supplies, equipment, and staff development within the school was the second major need principals emphasized. Principals, having defined themselves as the administrative managers of an independent subunit of the system, a school, now felt that they should have separate control over the operations of that unit. Considerable discussion centered on whether and what kind of accountability should go with this increased control. But principals

generally felt that they had accountability now without the authority and latitude they needed to make effective change.

To accompany this increase in their control caused by decentranizing of the system, principals wanted more support from their superiors in terms of special services and greater attention to their individual school's concerns. "Support" was viewed as the desire to be included in key policy decisions; to have their opinions and viewpoints considered; and the assurance that their on-line decisions would not be overturned.

b. Increased staffing and job definition. Some principals called for better and more staff to carry out their increased duties. This staff would include both teachers who could improve the kind and quality of education in the school and administrators to plan and carry out the principal's school-based policies. Others called for more carefully defined duties, job descriptions, and expectations from the central administration. With greater authority many principals wanted to know more explicitly what the limits of their discretion and responsibility would be. They sought clarity of their new role and powers within the hierarchial school system.

This concern seemed to stem from two commonly cited experiences. Principals often found their own managerial powers limited by school personnel (usually non-certified) who cited regulations, job descriptions, or lines of formal authority within the school system to defy a principal's requests. Principals naturally felt their authority

undermined in these circumstances and they resented that they must resort to persuasion, charisma, and petitioning, and sometimes taking on the job themselves to get it done. (One principal said he had to empty the trash barrels for the school breakfast program, because all other workers said it was not part of their job description.) Many principals felt that the vagueness of their own job descriptions left "everything else" to them, because they were responsible for "the total operation of the school." Many felt that increased control would leave them with too great a burden of responsibility if central administrators could not be relied on to support and respect their discretion.

Other principals seemed to want enhanced control and authority so they could get administrative decisions from "downtown" faster. Discussion proceeded from how information could be kept consistent and how it would flow from central policy makers to principals. Principals seemed to want to revise their roles so they could get access not just to power over their local schools, but to the respect from central administrators which would give them access to system-wide, coordinative power.

It is interesting that no principals seemed to desire, or perhaps to comprehend, a system in which principals could hold "final" authority. This is especially interesting in view of the fact that one reorganization model did propose a school-based management system--and it was this model that the principals voted strongly for the administration to adopt. But, in the discussion of the role of principals and of how the system would operate under such a system, they never discarded the

notion that system-wide policy and coordination would retain a valid and authoritatively higher role than that of local school policy.

A few individuals called for greater tolerance of inconsistency, "freedom," and ambiguity in their new roles. These "liberals" appeared to feel that flexibility must be tolerated and that some disregard of the formal rulebook is healthy in a system. But even these "liberals," all accepted the system's right to assert one consistent policy over all schools at its discretion.

c. Personal growth, rewards. A fair number of principals mentioned a need for greater personal growth, recognition, and rewards (salary, compensation time, and professional development leaves) in their jobs. Some also mentioned a desire for greater respect and consideration from their superiors. None mentioned a desire to attain greater respect or be afforded greater leadership by the teachers or students in a school. Partly, I suspect, this is because principals already felt they had enough respect from their teachers and students. Their concerns and their sights are higher up the administrative ladder. However, these more personal considerations seemed to hold less importance than the organizational changes principals desired in their role.

No mention was made of a need to change the principal's image or relationship with the community. Principals saw their role in the school system as self-contained. Community perception of them they saw as fixed or out of their control.

3. Summary of Findings

The principals I observed perceived themselves as "in the middle" of a large bureaucracy. They described themselves as restricted by rules, by the community, and by higher administrative supervision. They mentioned themselves less often as educational, community, or administrative leaders than as rule-followers in a large system.

They showed remarkable peer solidarity, but they regarded their group power as weak. They described their main functions as primarily administrative tasks, but they continued to voice responsibility for improving instructional quality. They supported the traditional lines of authority and decision making of a hierarchial school system.

In a reorganized school system they wanted clearer personal authority and greater services from support staff and backing from administrators. Principals wanted greater control over staffing and budgets within schools, but they accepted a strong coordinative role at the school district level rather than full school-based management.

DISCUSSION

There are some fascinating differences between traditional "textbook" descriptions of the role and functions of a principal and those functions desired and articulated by the principals I observed.

It is hard to find many of the time-worn assumptions about the principal's key duties in educational leadership, personnel development, community outreach and service, student guidance, occupational development, curriculum planning and testing, and others, among the seminar notes. Jacobson, Logsdon, and Wiegman, a typical principal's handbook, can serve as a convenient touchstone to illustrate another discrepancy. It states "...the principal's most important task is the improvement of instruction," (p. 135). And on p. 415:

> As the manager of a school, the principal has "business functions" to perform as well as educational functions. The educational functions of course exceed in importance the duties which are managerial. . ."

Yet, these principals spoke about their roles much as would the middle managers in any corporation. Their concerns were for staff morale, training and selection. They wanted control of budgets and resource allocations. They sought greater respect and recognition from higher ups. Principals were concerned with fulfilling their duties to evaluate staff accurately or to protect the due process of law rights of students, but they were just as concerned with documenting these actions for their own protection in case they should ever be questioned about them. Such concerns are not directly contrary to the textbook duties of educators, but the new emphasis places them in a more adversary light. The concept "leadership" given so much emphasis in texts seemed empty in light of the "middleness" many principals described in their jobs.

The group solidarity between principals and teachers cited in the study by the Oregon Center for Study of Educational Administration (Jacobson,

Logsdon, Wiegman, p. 16) was not evident in the seminars. Principals did not seem to be in conflict with teachers, but they did not seem to share common perceptions of their overlapping roles or of the collaborative potential they had with the teachers in their building. Perhaps these principals were being more realistic than the textbooks in seeming to acknowledge that their own expertise could not be both managerial and instructional. They acknowledged a great deal of expertise and specialization of knowledge and function among the instructional staff. Unfortunately, rather than having the effect of raising this function to a collaborative one with their management, it seemed to lower the power and prestige of the instructional role.

Lipham and Hoeh say, and Reed, 1977, confirms, that principals often desire to spend more time on instructional leadership and less on administrative details--finance, reports, etc. But I did not hear much pressure or desired emphasis on this. What there was came primarily from those few women and elementary school principals who remained close to teaching. The same kinds of concerns are evident in relationships with students and community. Emphasis was more likely to be on fulfilling administrative requirements and keeping complaints quiet than on entering into participative situations to create involvement and change.

In many ways, the complaints and gripes, vignettes, and dysfunctions principals spoke about could have occurred among any middle management group. Principals felt "caught in the middle," often unappreciated, overlooked and frustrated, but not particularly by their inability to

perform what they saw as uniquely educational functions. They easily perceived a common interest in maintaining group solidarity as key actors in the system who had shared perceptions of the organization. They remained advocates for their buildings and for enlarging the power and prestige of their roles as branch managers in a large corporation.

a. Self-Limited Roles. The descriptions I heard principals give of their roles within the school system were quite consistent with Sarason's, 1971, view of the self-limitations imposed by principals on themselves through their negative views of "the system" and their place within it. Sarason argues that when actors view "the system" as rigid and unresponsive and as something to protect themselves from, these concepts tend to become self-confirming and serve as a basis for individual inaction. A faulty view of what is possible within "the system" can actually affect role performance by constricting the "range of activities and the capacity to act." And it can convince individuals that no effort will have any effect. The result is that individuals frequently accept a more passive role, nearer the lower limit of their potential scope, than is necessary (pp. 133-142).

Turner's concept of role-taking versus role-making is also applicable here. Too often, in spite of their own common sense, principals often did not question "the system" or its traditions. They granted deference to its wisdom to restrict their own action. They did this both to avoid criticism by their superiors and out of genuine deference to their superiors to whom, being higher on the hierarchial ladder, they imputed

greater abilities and foresight than their own (See Thompson on status and attributed power and ability in hierarchies, and Barnard on pathologies of status systems in Sergiovanni & Carver, 1969.)

Sarason argues that, "The school system sets the lower limits of the scope and responsibility of the principal. The upper limits of the role are far less determined by the system than one might think by looking at modal performance" (p. 146). Principals, he argues, who have ideas and imagination have great latitude for action, and this diversity will be permitted and tolerated within the system. The great conformity that Sarason perceived among urban school principals is not necessary, he argues.

Sarason's emphasis on the individual's perception of autonomy within his own role is akin to Karl Weick's idea of self-enacted organizations, whose members determine and create the possible modal activities of the organization through their collective enactments of them. Educational organizations, which Weick has called "loosely coupled systems" may be particularly prone to this type of flexibility or role interpretation and action. According to Weick, Sarason, and by extension, Turner, a restrictive enactment of an organization even by a large group of people is no bar to a less restrictive enactment by another group or even by a single individual. This is especially true in a loosely coupled system where direct reprisals for non-conformity are rare.

What seems important, and what Sarason, I think, neglects, is that most principapals do not wish to act in a way that is merely "tolerated" unless

it is also somehow "rewarded." Principals are on the way up. They wish to conform to organizational norms in order to get ahead. They may perceive that nonconformity in a certain instance is possible (i.e., "tolerable") and yet choose to conform, knowing that conformity is more likely to be rewarded with an increased hierarchial position within the system. This interpretation depends less on a principal's internal attitude toward determining or accepting fate than on his or her assessment of what values the system rewards and what career objectives the individual will pursue.

I felt that the principals I observed were divided in their acceptance of role conformity. In many ways they seemed to be engaged in the process of deliberate role-making, which Turner describes as the opposite of passive conformity with an imposed job (1962, p. 22). Many principals seemed to feel hemmed in, restricted to the lowest limit of their scope of authority. These were mainly the least imaginative, most conservative, and often the longer-tenured participants. But a large number of mainly (but not all) younger principals seemed to accept conformity with great deliberateness, as a means to another end. These usually "new" principals were testing their roles, building credibility for advancement, and meanwhile were "staying in line." Their critical (and sometimes partial) acceptance of their role changed their own and the system's view of "appropriate" behavior.

b. Reliability of research findings. It remains to be asked how reliably do these observations about principals square with other ethnographic

studies and research on principals which have been made in different settings? Ethnographic studies such as those by Keller, Peterson, Porter-Gehrie, Wolcott, and the vignettes offered by Sarason offer insights into how principals conduct their daily tasks and approach their jobs. The richness of a thorough ethnography can often give evidence to support many contradictory theories, but it seems safe to say that the principals I observed were not atypical of their profession and role.

Keller and Wolcott emphasize the many petty administrative tasks principals must do. The mundaneness and simplicity of much of their work contrasts often with public or mythic expectations of strong educational and administrative leadership. Smooth operations rather than innovation or change becomes an end in itself (Keller pp. 115-22). Keller notes that strong leadership is not typical of successful principals. Wolcott, to some extent, agrees (p. 307). Peterson and Porter-Gehrie noted the managerial qualities of the principal's tasks. The lack of initiation in many activities, perpetual superficiality, inability to plan, decision press, and relatively little time spent on innovative or curricular tasks seems similar to the principals I observed.

Principals in the survey research studies identify staff relations, dealing with student behavior, and complying with administrative and federal regulations as their primary tasks and problems. Curriculum development and community involvement are not listed as areas of exceptional concern.

Problems in dealing with administrative hierarchies are not much emphasized by the principals in research surveys. Since the group I observed did show great concern about how it "fit" into the system, it may be atypical. However, it is also possible that the formal surveys of opinion and the interviews have not tapped principals' perceptions of their unique organizational perspective and place in the total system. Ethnographic studies could have overlooked this aspect of principals' attitudes by concentrating on individual princiapls rather than the interaction of principals with each other. Finally, it is likely that interactions I observed may be more characteristic of a subgroup of principals from large, urban, older systems, where a number of principals hold similar jobs than of smaller school systems.

CONCLUSION

The tension between what principals are taught about their roles and how they experience these roles in reality is a potential source of significant role conflict and stress for the people inhabiting these positions. It might necessitate reorientation of our administrative training of those about to enter the role.

Principals operate within a highly complex and differentiated bureaucracy. Although they often perceive the dysfunctions of the bureaucratic system, they usuasily rely on more or "better use" of the same kinds of procedures to solve--or rearrange--bureaucratic problems. They accept the hierarchial authority of the school system, and its goals of efficiency, and they wish to "work their way up it."

Much of the work of principals is mundane and petty and is "caught in the middle." Yet, the principal's role remains critical in the eyes of the public, and of students, and of many system administrators. How principals resolve the conflict between their mythic leadership and symbolic centrality with their role in a highly bureaucratic school system is a fascinating balance of careful calculation, frustration, and self delusion.

Appendix

TABLE I

TALLY SHEET OF ISSUES AND CONCERNS

EXPRESSED BY PRINCIPALS IN SEMINAR SESSIONS

GENERAL CONCERNS	
about rules	30
about educational issues/leadership/stewardship	7
PERCEPTION OF ROLE/PLACE	
look up--seek system goals, consistency	22
in the middle	10
peer solidarity	16
aloneness, uniqueness	6
critical of peers	6
ATTITUDES	
distrust of superintendents	26
self preservation/avoid risk	16
distrust seminar agenda, skeptical of any change	26
hemmed in by regulations, outside forces	23
latitude sufficient	6
idealistic about change	4
confidence in present system, without change	11
PERCEPTION OF PRESSURES	
no time	6
job intensity	3
from community	16
from teachers/staff	2
from superiors (personal pressure)	4
from students	15
from system bureaucracy, overrulings, etc.	14
from better public relations	5
EXPRESSED ROLE RESPONSIBILITIES	
safe environment	3
personnel development and morale	5
community leadership	2
education of children	5
administration of staff	1
due process protection	4
public trust	1
taking risks	1

TABLE I (CONT.)

EXPRESSED ROLE FUNCTIONS	
instructional leader	6
staff manager	17
symbol, figurehead	1
disturbance handler	9
liaison	6
enterpreneur	1
community leader	3
decision maker	3
rule follower-procedural	14
placator	5
interpreter of regulations	6
leader of students	4
resource allocator	5
EXPRESSED NEEDS IN NEW ROLE	
authority over staff	20
need for control generally	18
for respect	5
for defined duties/expectations	7
for authority over funds	13
for instructional leadership and staff development	9
for better/more staff	7
for community change	0
for authority over students	9
for personal development/expansion/awards	7
for support from superiors, support services, etc.	13
for more freedom from consistency	2
PERCEPTIONS OF PERSONAL POWER	
weak	3
pragmatic/resilient	8
charismatic	1
hierarchial	11
collaborative	5
supportive	1
OTHER OBSERVATIONS AND OCCURENCES	
personal attacks on members	2
dysfunctions perceived in system	2
vignettes of weak principals	7
information-seeking questions from peers to peers	10
off record comments--on system's flexibility or individual manipulation of it	3

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